The People of Stories: Gateways to Telling Our Collective Tale

By Rabbi Talia Avnon-Benveniste
with
Jaime Banks
Rachel Druck
Yael Rosen

Tel Aviv, 2018
The People of the Book, the People of Stories

The Jewish People are famously known as the “People of the Book.” But what does that actually mean? What has drawn us, generation after generation, to books, and what significance does it have for us as a people?

Whether fiction or non-fiction, sacred or profane, books are about telling stories. The relationship of the Jewish People to books is about the ways in which we attempt, in various different ways and from different perspectives, to discern the type of overarching story that we want to tell about ourselves as a people. We read the Torah to tell us the stories of the creation of our people; we read the stories of rabbis and sages to understand the values that undergird the stories of the Torah and how those values can be lived in the world; Jewish poets and authors have attempted to explore how those values have changed and how they should be redefined and understood in the context of the wider world. All of these books have told—and built—stories about Jewish history, Jewish culture, and Jewish values: where we come from, where we are, and where we would like to go.

The fact that Jews have been attempting to tell and retell a collective story for generations is an indication of how difficult it can be to develop a collective narrative. Indeed, the struggle to define a collective narrative is not limited to the Jewish people: organizations, movements, nations, companies, and communities all grapple with how to define themselves and their terms of membership. It is a process that is never entirely finished. For example, a number of countries in the western world have been founded on democratic ideals, with strong foundational narratives about offering opportunities for anyone, whether immigrant or native-born, to work towards, and ultimately achieve, a better life for themselves and their families. Yet as the 21st century gets underway, many of these same nations are fiercely debating immigration, multiculturalism, and isolation versus nationalism—and underlining all of these debates is the questions they raise about the country’s deeply-held values, and the stories it tells about itself.

Additionally, personal identities, and not just group identities, can raise fraught and constantly-evolving questions. These questions can reflect on an individual's gender and sexual orientation, religion and politics, education, socioeconomic background, location, and life experiences. The stories we tell ourselves are constantly being rewritten, an ever-changing way to understand not only our personal story, but also who we are in relation to others. We believe that our lives are part of a larger story, and we search for meaning, a sense of belonging, and for connection.

Similarly, those of us who identify as Jews need to continue to define the greater Jewish story, one that reflects how we exist in the contemporary world. This process is further complicated by the somewhat historically-unique moment that we are living in: a world where most Jews are not required to live in Jewish communities, and the choice of how to be Jewish is made on a much more individual level. This individualism forces us to reexamine peoplehood and ask the difficult, all-encompassing questions: What is our collective story? How do we define who we are in ways that are meaningful? And how do we transmit and teach those definitions to the next generation?
There are a number of ways to tell a story, and we are not limited to the pages in books. While there may be no consensus on how to define being Jewish, six fundamental gateways into the Jewish experience can help us tell the contemporary story of the Jewish people: historical memory, Jewish practices and spirituality, Jewish creation and creativity, Hebrew and Jewish languages, the world of Jewish values, and Israel as a multidimensional concept. These concepts will be defined more closely below, but taken together they can be seen as core concepts, or portals from which the Jewish story can emerge and grow.

1. **Historical Memory**: Our understanding of a shared past that, to varying extents, continues to inform our lives. We express our pain and our joy using the communal language given to us by our history. These emotional experiences can take place whether we are celebrating the Exodus from Egypt, lighting the Chanukkah candles, commemorating the Holocaust, or otherwise marking Jewish events and experiences throughout the calendar year. Our history connects us with one another, and we pass these memories down to our children.

2. **Jewish Practices and Spirituality**: This concept refers to what Jews do in their homes and in their personal and communal lives as part of living a Jewish life. This could include lighting candles on Shabbat, fasting on Yom Kippur, celebrating a bar or bat mitzvah, building a Sukkah, and honoring Jewish customs. These practices, however they are undertaken, represent the desire to connect with something beyond one’s individual experience.

3. **Jewish Creation and Creativity**: The world of Jewish art and culture is vast, and there are a number of ways to make it a meaningful part of a Jewish life. The gateway itself is broad, and can refer to works by Jewish creators, Jewish creations, and Jewish interpretations of the works of others. In practice, this can include reading Jewish authors and poets, learning new piyyutim (liturgical poetry), attending an Israeli film festival, singing a new version of Adon Olam, or trying out a new recipe for Passover cake. Taking inspiration from a Jewish figure, such as
Maimonides, Regina Jonas, or Albert Einstein, can be a way of not simply learning from creative Jewish figures, but of reinforcing and reinventing that creativity. Similarly, challenging established thinking—in math, science, architecture, or any other field—is a proud and longstanding part of our tradition of questioning authority and thinking about the world in new and creative ways.

4. Hebrew and Jewish Languages: Hebrew has been the universal Jewish language for centuries, regardless of any individual’s fluency in, and understanding of, the language. Nonetheless, it is not the only Jewish language. Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic are particularly prominent and important, though Jews around the world speak—and spoke—a myriad of different languages. Reading, speaking, and writing in one or more of these languages can be a powerful way to connect to people and subcultures within the Jewish community (Yiddishists, socialists, secularists, Zionists, Chassidim, to name a few), and Jewish history.

5. The World of Jewish Values: Scholars debate whether or not it is possible to refer to particular values as being specifically “Jewish.” Some say that the values that we might attribute to a specific religion are actually universal values that each religion relates to in its own way. Others assert that there are, in fact, concepts that stem from a particular religion that were eventually embraced by the wider world. While the purpose of this article is not to weigh in on this debate one way or another, it is still important to acknowledge the character traits, ethics, and ideals that form the cornerstone of Jewish values; these values are not necessarily exclusively Jewish, but are nonetheless foundational ideals within Judaism. Typically, these terms are expressed in Hebrew, and include—but are not limited to—tikkun olam (repairing the world), tzedakah (justice/charitable giving), Talmud Torah (teaching and learning Torah), bikur cholim (visiting the sick), hachnasat orchim (welcoming the stranger), and gemilut chassadim (acts of lovingkindness). Judaism has an ethical and moral language that, however it is expressed, is, by necessity, a fundamental and inseparable part of any individual’s or community’s life.

6. Israel as a Multidimensional Concept: The Land of Israel, Zion, the Jewish Homeland: these are just a few ways of articulating an idea that has always been a major part of Jewish history and Jewish spirituality. From the very beginning of the Bible through the present day, Jews have related to this concept in a number of different ways, whether through the religious texts, prayer, visiting the land, supporting the people and institutions in it, immigrating, or even by protesting against it. Some connect with the concept of Eretz Yisrael, the Biblical land that was promised to Abraham and which the Israelites reached after 40 years of wandering in the desert. Others think of it as a homeland, the culmination of the Zionist movement, and a necessary shelter in the wake of the Holocaust. Another perspective finds connection with the modern State of Israel, a country with nearly nine million people of different races, religions, and ethnicities: a highly successful nation, but one that has yet to reach an agreement with its neighbors and finalize its borders. Each of these approaches can be significant and meaningful ways to relate to a (physical or philosophical) place that looms large in the Jewish imagination.

Whether together or separately, these gateways act as a roadmap for forging Jewish connections, Jewish engagement, and a vision for a Jewish future. They are not static: rather, they can encompass different values, practices, and levels of engagement—even those that may be contradictory—and any one value could correspond with multiple different gateways. For example, Shabbat could fit in the gateways of Historical Memory, Jewish Practices and Spirituality, Jewish Creation and Creativity, and the World of Jewish Values, depending on an individual or group’s approach to their Shabbat practice. Chanukkah could fit into the gateways of Historical Memory (the holiday commemorates a historical event), Jewish Practices and Spirituality (lighting the Chanukkah candles, singing Hallel), Jewish Creation and Creativity (singing a new tune for Al Hanissim, playing dreidel), and Israel as a Multidimensional Concept (connecting to the Temple where the miracle of the lights took place, or visiting the modern Israeli city of Modi’in-Maccabim-Re’ut, where the Maccabean revolt began). Meanwhile, Torah study could fit into every single category. Ultimately, the purpose of the gateways is to enable us to understand the story of where we are, who we are, what we are striving to achieve, and what the next chapter could be.
In 1983 the political scientist Benedict Anderson published a book called *Imagined Communities*, in which he argues that every community is created by the collective imagination of the individuals who form that group. He writes: “The fellow members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them. Yet in the minds of each lives the image of the communion...Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity or genuineness, but in the style in which they are imagined.” Anderson offers three potential tools for a community to approach this process of discernment and imagining: the census, the map, and the museum.

The census, in fact, has a prominent role within Jewish tradition (the Bible is full of censuses) and might, therefore, appear to be a fitting tool through which we can tell the story of Jewish peoplehood. But this method can be problematic. First, it would be impossible to agree on whom to include: only those who are halachically Jewish? Those who identify as Jewish? Even leaving aside the questions of who to count, is there a question—or even a set of questions—that would yield meaningful data about the Jewish experience? There is no single question that defines who is Jewish, and what it means to be Jewish. A census would, therefore, be both impractical and ineffective.

Anderson’s second tool for defining community is a map. On its face, it makes sense that to understand the (literal and figurative) framework of a community’s identity, its geographical borders should be considered. But a map turns out to be equally as inadequate as a census. The borders of Israel, the Jewish state, change—and using Israel’s borders to define the Jewish map and story works only by ignoring the fact that more than half of world Jewry lives outside of Israel (and may not connect to the modern State of Israel). If we were to rely on geographical tools to tell the Jewish story, we would need to use the entire globe.

---

*As for me, being Jewish means taking action.*

Boris Weiner

Photographer: Anton Mislawsky
You Are Part of the Story

Clearly Anderson’s first two tools, the census and the map, are too limited in their ability to fully and accurately frame the Jewish story. Fortunately, he offers a third tool: the museum. This approach can be more useful. Indeed, it has proven to be a rather popular tool; every western nation has its own national museum—and often more than one museum—that tells its collective story from various angles. For example, Washington D.C.’s National Mall, located at the heart of the capital of the United States, is home to multiple Smithsonian Museums, each dedicated to a particular theme; the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; the National Museum of the American Indian; and the museum that tells what is perhaps America’s most difficult story: The National Museum of African American History and Culture. Israel is actually said to have more museums per capita than any other country in the world. From international museums to smaller museums in towns, villages, and kibbutzim, Israelis have sought to tell their history of immigration, the Holocaust, religious history, and numerous other topics from multiple different angles. As Anderson reminds us, no nation’s history—or even a single historical episode—can be expressed from one perspective. There are multiple perspectives and lenses, and the story of any community is really the sum of its individual stories.

The idea that there are many components to the Jewish story is a cornerstone of Beit Hatfutsot-The Museum of the Jewish People. Indeed, the museum’s motto is, in fact, “You Are Part of the Story.” It is a wide-ranging story, one that includes Jews from the East, the West, and the Middle East; Reform, ultra-Orthodox, and every denomination (and non-denomination) in between; men and women; secular and religious. Highlighting this point is the museum’s logo: a Star of David that is composed of a mosaic of many irregular pieces of different sizes, shapes, and colors. Each piece is unique and essential, and it becomes quickly apparent if even one is missing. Each piece represents a different individual, a different family, a different community, and a different way of life. We work to represent the six gateways within our walls so that each visitor has the opportunity to ask themselves how they are part of the Jewish story and what their next step is in their Jewish journey. Our aim is to inspire our visitors to continue this dialogue in their hearts, in their homes, and throughout their lives.
The People of Stories

Even more than the People of the Book, we are the People of Stories. The stories we tell can encompass an infinite cast of characters and, best of all, are part of a never-ending process of discovery, growth, and rediscovery. Each and every one of us has a story to tell, and together we create the greater story of our people.

Questions for Discussion:

- Where would you begin to tell your story?
- Who are the core figures in your story? Who is present and who is absent?
- What are the key elements of your story?
- Who or what is missing that you would like to add?
- Where does your story take place?
- What are ways in which your community tells its story? Who are the core figures? Who is present and who is absent? Where does the story take place?
- What are your gateways to the story of the Jewish people?
- Is your story a gateway for others? If so, how? If not, is there an individual who serves as a gateway for you?
- How do you want to continue writing your story?
- What is the next chapter?

The ideas presented in this article are based on the work done for the past decade by the dedicated staff at the Koret International School for Jewish Peoplehood at Beit Hatfutsot-The Museum of the Jewish People. Special thanks to Naama Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, Gideon Shimoni, and Nurit Chamo, editors of Jewish Peoplehood: A Theoretical and Practical Outline for Teaching and Learning (Hebrew), published by Beit Hatfutsot-The Museum of the Jewish People, where several of the ideas presented in this article first appeared.
The Museum of the Jewish People at Beit Hatfutsot

The Koret International School for Jewish Peoplehood
The Bernard H. and Miriam Oster Visual Documentation Center
The Nadav Foundation

Tel Aviv University Campus
PO Box 39359
Tel Aviv 6139202, Israel
Tel: +972-3-745-7900  |  info@bh.org.il
www.bh.org.il